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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a critical, analytical, and evaluative study of Samad Behrangi's educational life, writings, and thoughts by exploring the influence of Behrangi's ideas, theories, and educational practices on the past, present, and future of the Iranian education system. Samad Behrangi was an Iranian teacher who wrote extensively on a variety of topics. He was influenced by Maslow and Rogers who claimed that children's physical, emotional, and intellectual needs must be given a great deal of attention in schools. He was mainly concerned with the quality and suitability of textbooks and how they were taught to rural and village students. He was concerned also with the living conditions, educational survival, and societal responsibilities to these Iranian children. The paper is organized under the following headings: Who Is Samad Behrangi? Behrangi's Popular Publications; What Did Behrangi Live, Fight, and Die For? Behrangi's Suggestions for Educational Reforms; How Should Stories and Folklore Be Taught? How Should Teachers Be Trained? What Is Wrong with Iran's School System? Behrangi's Masterpiece: "What is "Mahi-e Seyah-e Kocholo?" and How Did Behrangi's Life End? (LL)

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International Rural Education Teachers and Literary Critics: Samad Behrangi's Life, Thoughts, and Profession

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...if someday I should be forced to face death-as I shall-it doesn't matter. What does matter is the influences that my life or death will have on the lives of others..." From The Little Black Fish

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International Rural Education Teachers and Literary Critics: Samad Behrangi's Life, Thoughts, and Profession

The purpose of this paper is to provide a critical, analytical, and evaluative study of Samad Behrangi's educational life, writings, and thoughts. The influence of Behrang's ideas, theories, and educational practices on the past and present structure and direction of the Iranian education system is another area with which this paper is concerned. For this study, only primary and secondary sources in Farsi and English available in the United States were utilized. Without a doubt, this research would have had been more comprehensive and complete if the author had access to more firsthand sources and the opportunity to interview living friends of Behrangi in Iran and Europe. In any event, the lack of some of the original sources and other related obstacles did not prevent accomplishing this important task which for a long time piqued the professional and personal interest of the writer. The author hopes that others in the field of education or in other related disciplines will do follow-up studies so future generations of Iranian and international teachers and educators may benefit from Behrangi's meaningful and poignant experiences to offer appropriate education to the students in the remote villages of Iran.

He wrote a considerable number of publications and books on a variety of topics, but his main concerns were focused on the rural children's home life conditions, their educational survival and learning, and society's responsibility to the village children and rural education of Iran.

The central focus of this informative piece of work is the educational problems that the country was facing in both rural, urban, and suburban areas because of the government's ineffective educational policies, unsuitable curricula, faulty administrative decisions, inappropriate textbooks, and the poor conditions of schools.

Perhaps, what troubled Behrangi most about the educational process of the village students was the quality and the suitability of the textbooks and how they it was taught.

During the history of Iranian children's literature, perhaps this is the first time that the child is taught and told the truths as things were. Behrangi strongly believed that if Iranian children are exposed to this new and democratic concept and philosophy of life and education, they will get to know their family well, will learn about their society's political system, educational establishment, economic problems and prosperity, and will learn about things as they exist around them in reality. An important lesson might be learned as one reviews Behrangi's writings and life: his educational theories and experiences could be considered as the basis of a new educational paradigm for struggling and emerging educational systems not only in Iran but also in other culturally, politically, and educationally similar developing and underdeveloped countries which are at the beginning or the middle of the struggle to adopt and implement the Western educational ideas in their countries which ancient cultural, religious, and traditional ideas have an important root and place.

Samad Behrangi was extremely brave educator to write and state in a loud and clear voice what lesser other educator, politicians, and people were afraid of or incapable of writing or expressing and perhaps that cost his tragic death as it happened to Socrates life in 300 B.C. as he bravely challenged undemocratic policies of the Athens City-State of the time.

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Internation Rural Teachers and Literary Critics: Samad Behrangi's Life, Thoughts, and Profession

M. H. Fereshteh

The purpose of this paper is to provide a critical, analytical, and evaluative review of Samad Behrangi's educational life, writings, and thoughts. Samad Behrangi was a contemporary Iranian teacher, educational critic, reformer, and scholar. The influence of his ideas, theories, and actions on the past and present structure and direction of the Iranian education system is another area with which this paper is concerned. For this study, only primary and secondary sources in Farsi and English available in the United States were utilized to accomplish this study. Without a doubt, this analysis would have been more comprehensive had the author had access to more firsthand sources and the opportunity to interview living friends of Behrangi in Iran and Europe. In any event, the lack of some of the original sources and other related obstacles did not prevent accomplishing this important task which for a long time piqued the professional and personal interest of the author. The author hopes that others in the field of education or in other related disciplines will do follow-up studies so future generations of Iranian teachers and educators may benefit from Behrangi's meaningful and poignant experiences to offer appropriate education to the students in the remote villages of Iran.

Who Is Samad Behrangi?

His hometown was Harandab, an impoverish neighborhood part of city of Tabriz, which is one of the largest, most ancient, and yet most modern cities in Iran. It is the capital of the province of Azarbaijan. Behrangi was born to an impoverished family in 1939. He obtained his elementary and secondary education in Tabriz as an honor student and after finishing 9th grade he entered Daneshsarayea-Keshavarzi, a two year teacher education institution established during the 1950s to train honor students interested in teaching in the Iranian village schools. Upon finishing his two years at Daneshsar, Behrangi, at the age of eighteen, became a teacher and was sent to Dabestan Onsari (Onsari Primary School) in Dehkhareghan, a village near Azarshahr, a town in the northwestern part of Azarbiajan. When Behrangi was a student in Daneshsara he published a weekly newspaper called Khandeh or Laughing, which was posted on the wall of the school building so that the entire school community could read it. At this time in Iran, this was a rather impressive achievement to be accomplished by a high school student. In 1961, while he was a teacher in Mamaghan, another Azarbyjan village, he received a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Tabriz University. After his graduation, Behrangi spent ten years in the rural and remote villages of Azarbyjan teaching, solving problems of village education, writing, opening libraries for the village children, carrying children's books on his shoulders for the village students, and writing stories for village students.[1]

As the word of his dedication and genuine concern for Azarbyjanese children reached Tehran and the headquarters of the Ministry of Education, the Minister invited Behrangi to

the Ministry's central office to offer him a higher paying position and perhaps the chance to utilize some of his ideas, knowledge, and experiences with children to improve village education. Behrangi came to Tehran, but after a few days, he felt uncomfortable with the climate and the political and cultural aspects of the city: "I don't like this polluted city and the smog is poisoning my blood. I want to go back to my village and children..."[2] He went back to Akhjeirjan village eagerly in order to be with his students and live the kind of life he loved.

Behrangi's Popular Publications

Behrangi wrote extensively while he was teaching and traveling through Azarbaijan villages. He drafted many short essays, books, articles, and reviews; however, it is difficult to determine the exact number of his writings because, unfortunately, some of his writings do not have a publisher's name or the date of publication.

The following are a number of the publications which have been collected, organized, and published by scholars and Behrangi's friends during the years after his death.

1. Children's Stories:
    a. Oldus va Kallaghha (Oldus and Crows), 1966
    b. Koroghlu va Cachal Hamzeh (Koroghlu and Scalp Hamzeh), 1969
    c. Oldus va Arusak-e Sokhango (Oldus and the Talking Doll), 1967
    d. Pesarak-e Labu Foroush (The Little Sugar Beet Vendor), 1967
    e. Kachal-e Kaftar Baz (The Bald Pigeon-Fancier's), 1967
    f. Afsane-e Mohabbat (The Story of Love), 1967
    g. Mahi-e Seyah-e Kocholu (The Little Black Fish), 1968
    h. Yek Holo Hezar Holo (One Peach - A Thousand Peaches), 1968
    i. Bistochahar Saat Dr. Khabo va Bidari (24 Restless Hours), 1969
    j. Talkhun, 1969

2. Educational and Social Articles:
    a. Kand-u-Kav Dar Masayeal-e Tarbieti-e Iran (An Investigations of Educational Problems in Iran), 1965
    b. Alefbayea-e Farsi Barayea Kudakan-e Azarbaijan (Farsi's Alphabet for Azarbyjan's Children)

3. Collection of Articles:
    a. Afsane-e Azarbyjan: Jelde Avval (Story of Azarbaijan, Volume One), 1965
    b. Afsane-e Azarbyjan: Jelde Dowom (Story of Azarbaijan, Volume Two), 1968
    c. Tayama Jalem, Ghoshma Jalad (Proverb Pieces)
    d. Pareh Pareh (Pieces and More Pieces), 1963

4. Folklore, Poems, and Translations:
    a. Ma Olagha (We Donkeys), 1965

b. Daftar-e Ashar-e Muaaser (The Contemporary Book of Poems)
c. Kharabkar (Sabotage), 1968
d. Kalagh Seyaheh (Story of the Black Crow), 1968
e. Tapmajdlar, Ghoshmajalar (Proverbs and Riddles), 1966[3]

He wrote a considerable number of writings on a variety of topics, but his main concerns were focused on children's home life conditions, their educational survival and learning, and society's responsibility to the village children of Iran. As one reads the above writings of Behrangi, he or she is reminded of the educational ideas of two great American humanistic philosophers and educators, Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, who claimed that children's physical, emotional, and intellectual needs must be given a great deal of attention in schools. The village students' poor home conditions always angered Behrangi, and he expressed that emotion in many of his publications clearly and loudly so the government authorities, public, intellectuals, and educational leaders would hear him.

What did Behrangi live, fight, and die for?

Among his works, the one which stands out as the most practical and critical approach to solve some of the teaching and learning problems of Iranian village schools was Kando-Kaw Dar Masalyeal Tarbieaty Eerahn (A Search and Exploration into the Educational Problems of Iran). Many of Behrangi's noble ideas, perspectives, and feasible educational solutions are discussed in the book. It is a "case study" and phenomenological research done by Behrangi.

The central focus of this informative piece of work is the educational problems that the country was facing in both rural and urban areas because of the government's ineffective educational policies, curricula, administrative decisions, inappropriate textbooks, and the poor conditions of schools. He claimed that,

> ...many of the decisions made in the Ministry of Education did not relate and apply to the real life of Iranian students in villages. Many of these authorities either were not prepared well or were not competent to make proper and effective decisions in regard to overall school practices and outcomes.[4]

Behrangi strongly argued that the educational practices and solutions for the villages and local communities must come from those who are directly involved in the educational process of the village students and that the classroom texts must be produced by the local experts too. In this regard he maintained that,

> Unless we have seen the school's environment and surrounding community, unless we have lived among the people, unless we have been friends with the people, we have not heard their voice and have

> not known their desires, it is not even proper to have sympathy for the environment, or impose unrelated educational policies, or even to write stories or textbooks for them.[5]

In other words, Behrangi is claiming that those writers and educators sitting in the Ministry of Education are preparing unrelated and useless textbooks and teaching materials which don't suit many schools of rural and urban areas.

> If educators in Tehran have not had any personal contact with the people of the village of Mamaghan or familiarity with the culture and language of the Iranian rural areas, how can they, who are enjoying an extremely comfortable and luxurious life with all kinds of modern facilities, understand the poverty-stricken life of Mamaghan's children who eat only once a day a meal which consists of bread and cheese, bread dipped in sweet-tea, and bread and onion.[6]

During Behrangi's professional life, it was the educational policy of Iran that the entire country used the same textbooks whether they spoke Farsi, Turkish or any other local language. Over the years, this policy on the national and local level has added to the other problems, particularly in the area of communication among students and teachers, principals, and members of communities. It has hampered the learning process of the local children whose native dialect is not Farsi. Behrangi was the first educator who brought up this educational issue for discussion. He protested to some of the irrelevant policies, fought for, demanded action and change, and perhaps lost his life because of his persistence for better decision. To cite one example of his opposition to the inefficacy of some of the educational policies and decisions of the government, here are the words he spoke on the issue when he first began his teaching as a young instructor:

> As soon as I graduated from Daneshsara (Teachers' Training College), I was sent to a remote village where I suddenly learned that whatever I had learned in college was absolutely useless for an economically poor place like this. I must forget the methods and materials and put them all aside. And, I discovered, I must find and develop my own new techniques and tricks in order to be a useful teacher in this village.[7]

Behrangi's ideas for educational change and fundamental pedagogical reforms gradually started impacting on some aspects of the existing elementary education system and reached the whole country - not only the remote villages of the province of Azarbyjan.

For Behrangi the issues of the empowerment and involvement of teachers and parents in the local schools' curricula formation and textbook preparation process were a serious concern, as he pointed out in his book,

> In last year's first grade text, which was much better than the text from

> the year before, there was a picture of dear papa, mother, dara, azar (modern city name for father, mother, boy and girl) who are having dinner around a tablecloth, and chairs around the table. The room is expensively and extravagantly decorated. There are knives and forks, Chinese plates, a crystal water pitcher and many other items. I ask my students: What are these children and their parents doing in the picture? My students became stupefied if I tell them they are having dinner without having introduced the subject. The students would think that I am a total liar. Is it not true that in the village at dinner time we set the sofreh (tablecloth) on the floor and dadi (father) sits on the upper side and the naneh (mother) pours abgosht or shorba (soup or porridge) in the bowl, to make telit (broth in which pieces of bread have been dipped)? The father starts using his hand to eat from the bowl and then everybody does the same. Therefore, what kind of eating experience is the textbook portraying to the children, who have never experienced a crystal water pitcher or fancy Chinese plates?[8]

Behrangi believed that all of the contents of the texts written by upper-and middle-class authors and government publishers were suitable only for wealthy inner-city or suburban students and the Farsi speaking individuals, but not useful for the poor illiterate village workers and farmers who represent the majority of Iran's population. Behrangi believed that,

> ...even if there is anything in the texts about village life and village education, it is written with the perception of an urban high middle class mind, not written by someone who has experienced village life.[9]

According to Behrangi, the authors and publishers are not in touch and familiar with the culture, character, andy nature of the students who will be reading these books and pamphlets. Here is an example of how angry he became as he read a passage from the textbook "Combing Hair" written for a second grade class:

> ...at the beginning of one of my texts, it says, "Dara combs his hair.", for a moment let's think seriously, the village boys who read this statement and they read it think about it. In fact, some of these boys never had a comb, and according to their traditions never dares to comb his hair, combing hair is not right morally for boys. They have heard from the village Mullah (village religious leader) that combing hair is not the right behavior for men and furthermore it is religiously prohibited.[10]

In each province, the local school district should set up its own education policies and curricula according to economic, cultural, and the educational needs of the village, town, and

city.

> Why does a child in the desert area have to learn about the cinema, when the cinema is non-existent in his/her village or province. Why must the teacher teach the word "cinema" when the teacher himself has not seen a movie or a moviehouse. A village child must learn about whatever exists around him, since it is possible for him to experience the very things that are around him. But a child cannot conceive of a thing he has not seen. When a child learns those things that are useful to him, he will be able to make use of them, develop them, and benefit from them.[11]

Behrangi should not only be considered as an educational critic, an energetic and patient teacher, a creative administrator, a pragmatic intellectual, but also a remarkable Iranian political and social critic whose thoughts and beliefs are embedded in his children's stories which are read by Iranian intellectuals, teachers, the public, and university students and faculty members.

Behrangi's Suggestions for Educational Reforms

Behrangi was also concerned about the gradual destruction of local ethnic cultures and the educational difficulties that villages face because of the unrelated educational policies of the government on both the state and national levels. The educational programs, policies, and texts must emanate from the culture and the environment of each community, rather than emanating from without. To this end Behrangi created his own teaching materials and texts for his Azarbyjanese village school. He even went soy far as to develop a working educational system for all Azarbyjanese children.

During Pahlavi's regime, Farsi formally became the national language for all of Iran. This was done against the will of most ethnic minorities. The Azarbyjanese were more dissatisfied with this rule than any other ethnic group. Not only because they were forced to communicate in a new, foreign language, but also because their Farsi accent was not welcomed by people who spoke Farsi and the accent became the basis for ethnic jokes about Azarbyjanese. The worst aspect of this situation was that most of the Farsi speaking teachers were assigned to Azarbyjanese schools, rural and innercity. This educational policy caused Behrangi anguish his whole professional life, seeing and feeling what educational chaos this decision had created in Azarbyjan. Nevertheless, Behrangi believed that Azarbyjanese children must learn Farsi.

Based on his experimental and case-study research on rural and village children and education, Behrangi suggested the following reforms:

> (a) Each province must have and provide its own texts. It should be kept in mind that villages in Azarbyjan and other rural areas should not

> be forced to use books written for urban areas such as Tehran; (b) the existing teaching method guides and books for the first grade are not suitable for Azarbyjanese teachers. The contents and pictures don't relate to the students' lives in villages. These are only useful in areas where students and children speak Farsi; (c) textbooks for Azarbyjans must be written by local school teachers and educators, not by university professors and teachers in Tabriz and Tehran. Teachers should be encouraged to get involved in the preparation of textbooks. Experienced teachers should be asked to become involved in the creation of textbooks because of their expertise and publications; (d) the authors of these textbooks should have an excellent command of both Farsi and Turkish so that they can find an effective, easier, and less traditional way of teaching; (e) selected teachers must be experts in Farsi literature as well as being fluent in the classics, because being knowledgeable in Farsi and Turkish prose, poetry, short stories, plays, and folklore is important for authors of these textbooks; (f) and teachers can make learning easier and interesting for local children if the authors of the texts find and use Turkish vocabulary which have Farsi roots and are spoken by the people in the community.[12]

Here, Behrangi's final point is extremely important, particularly in regard to first grade books, since first graders for the most part learn and use those vocabularies which their parents speak; even using Arabic words commonly used in Turkey is very helpful. The simple vocabulary words can be used in the first grade texts and the more difficult ones can be left for second and third grade. Behrangi's concerns about the way grammar was taught and the irrelevance of the content in the texts are expressed as follows:

> ...in first grade textbooks the number of prepositions should be reduced and the difficult ones must be avoided as they create some inconvenience for Azarbaijanese students. In Turkey, prepositions are placed at the beginning of the word and separated from words. If prepositions are to be used, they should be taught as one word like "Az Khaneh" (from house) which consists of the preposition and name. The teacher should not teach this proposition and word as one word like "As-khanneh." This confuses Turkish speaking students.[13]

In regard to the speaking and conversational aspect of teaching, Behrangi had some suggestions on the most effective ways to teach Farsi:

> ...the teaching method for villager students' texts must be in both Turkish and Farsi and conversation would become more accurate if Farsi is spoken as colloquial dialogue in the classroom. And in the

> meantime, if the teacher's native language is Turkish, he/she should ask some questions in Farsi followed by some simple Farsi sentences, and then translate them orally and in written form on the board into Turkish so the students can comprehend them in a simple and logical way...[14]

How should stories and folklore be taught?

To keep the local ethnic culture and literature alive for future generations of Azarbyjanese, Behrangi put a great deal of emphasis on how stories and folklore should be taught in the schools. He maintained that,

> ...if the teacher decides to tell stories and discuss them with students, it would be more effective if he/she can use local stories and folklore, not the ones from the text. Because when storytelling in the classroom it is a big help to have the students' attention and also the students enjoy hearing local stories from their own ethnic culture. Stories should be very simple and should begin at the first and second grade level. Teachers should select the story and then write it in a simple form and then read it to the students to be followed by a simple discussion. The vocabularies used in the stories for first grade must also be repeated in the second, third and so on; otherwise, the students forget the words they learned in the lower grades...[15]

Perhaps, what troubled Behrangi most about the educational process of the village students was the quality and the suitability of the textbooks and how they should be taught:

> ...as long as the proper texts are not prepared, the Azarbyjanese's educational problems will persist, and we will find that eighth and ninth grade students still have reading difficulties. The result might be hatred toward teachers whose native language is Farsi, and the students will become less and less interested in Farsi literature and dislike learning. Gradually, they will find Farsi a useless and frustrating language of teaching and learning.[16]

His concern for village education, in particular the country's educational problems, motivated him to provide and present firsthand information. He went from village to village and town to town to see, touch, and solve some of the problems. The following is his observation of a village school:

> The school includes only one room built on the hard sandy hill located at the end of the village. One third of the room is chosen as one classroom (first graders) with two to three benches, one blackboard and

> a few pieces of chalk. Another one-third of the room is chosen for another classroom with two to three benches, one blackboard and a few pieces of chalk for second and third graders. The last one-third is occupied by the teacher with an old geleim (rug) and a traveler bed. There are twelve students in one-third of the room of the school and four of them who come to the village for their summer vacations belong to the village land owner. Other students are the village farmers' children, most of whom have no shoes on. Only one or two have a type of shoe which is made from used rubber tires. He (teacher) is a young teacher, twenty years old and he looks tired and sad. He has a small short-wave transistor radio which connects him to the outside world. The teacher is mostly busy with villagers discussing and solving social, economic, and farming problems of the village.[17]

Below is a brief but interesting conversation Behrangi had with one of the villagers who did not send his son to school. He is talking to a student who did not go to school on that day because his father needed the boy to help him. Behrangi asks, "Why have you not gone to school today, son?" Instead of the son, the father answers, "Agha wallah lazemash dashtam ta dar khaneh beman komak koneh," or "Sir, I swear to Allah that I needed him at home at the farm to help. I cannot send him to school...I am alone and have too much work to do. Who is going to help me if I let him go to school?"[18]

How Should Teachers Be Trained?

On the matter of the qualifications and training of teachers, Behrangi doesn't sound positive and optimistic. Teachers' education and training did not seem to be taken seriously as a priority on the government's list. Behrangi's concerns can be perceived in the following words:

> ...generally teachers are not trained for the kind of work they are expected to perform in regard to their moral obligations and professional responsibilities toward students, the community, and the country. Teachers aren't earning the kind of salary that a teacher should earn, and they are not working in the villages or places in which they would prefer to work. They are facing many obstacles and deprivations related to educational policies, teacher training approaches, political problems, family problems, and the way the society sees its teachers.[19]

Inappropriateness of the content of the curriculum was another of Behrangi's deep concerns. He was angry because he knew that without an appropriate core curriculum, it was not possible for the universities to produce quality teachers. Criticizing the content, relevance, and the sources of the Teacher Education curriculum and courses, Behrangi argued that,

...the curriculum materials which are used to train these teachers are mostly from translations of works written by Western educators, scientists, and philosophers. These translations aren't suited to Iranian village society. In this society, a child has difficulty finding enough bread to eat and a glass of drinkable water. The contents of these translated materials are unrelated to this kind of culture. For example, a teacher has never touched a girl's hand or body before he gets married. How much of Dewey's or Darwin's theories or any other western educational view would relate to his teaching life? Simply, the Iranian teachers are not going to teach in the best schools in the world. The parents of village students do not earn enough money to provide the basic needs of their children to grow up healthy and to stay physically, emotionally, and intellectually sound so that they will be ready for a normal schooling process that the government provides for them like the children in Western societies. One should keep in mind that in these villages the children's clothes are washed in chobak (a kind of soapy rootbeer) which grows on the village's hills and mountains. There is no hammam (hygienic bathroom) in the village. The only village's hammam consists of a three meter deep well, a muddy wall, and a lolahand (ewer) to wash up. There is no public shower or hammam in the village. The people have to go to the nearest town in order to take an occasional shower or to wash their hair.[20]

What is Wrong with Iran's School System?

Behrangi believed the entire system of education with its centralized power and bad policies is unacceptable and misleads students and teachers in a wrong direction which consequently betrays the whole society. The results of bad schools and improper education soon will be seen in the quality of the working force, and in economic, agricultural, and technological development. Here are Behrangi's own words as he comments on the impact that the faulty policies of the country's educational leaders has on teachers:

...the policy makers who are sending inexperienced young teachers to the poor and remote villages, have they ever thought how these young teachers would spend their spare time while in the village? Whether they might become professional gamblers or alcoholics because there is nothing else around to do, or they are not interested in reading and so on... What facilities do they provide for these teachers to prevent a situation like that...? ...isn't it going to cause enormous problems that these new teachers are not interested in reading and writing? How is it possible to make their students read and write? Is there any way to

> provide them with interesting and educational books not only to help them do a better job but also keep them occupied after school and so on...?[21]

As Behrangi questions and criticizes the government for its educational policies, he also suggests some alternative solutions to some of the problems. Here are two examples of his suggestions stated in a question and answer format:

> What should we do to make teachers become more effective, responsible, and creative in the villages? 1) Discrimination and partiality against teachers and administrators must be removed; not only by political statements and a theoretical form but in practice and in a very serious way. 2) Getting rid of those lousy teachers who do not believe in their profession and are not doing a responsible job. 3) Assigning and transferring teachers from one village or city to another village or city must be on fair basis and the same rules should be applied to every teacher interested in being transferred. And lastly, the state and central government policy makers must do a quality job and fair amount of work to become good role models for the teachers.[22]

Behrangi's Masterpiece: What is Mahi-e Seyah-e Kocholo?

One cannot review Behrangi's educational and intellectual works without discussing Mahi-ye Siyah-e Kuchulu (The Little Black Fish). Behrangi had a profound knowledge of children's literature. His educational training, a bachelor's degree in English Literature from Tabriz University, writing for children, and working with children provided a broad background understanding of children, how they learn, their interests, their pains and the problems they face as they grow up in a traditional society in which children are brought into the world to help and work rather than to be children. This knowledge is clearly reflected in his masterpiece, The Little Black Fish, or in the original Farsi writing, Mahi-yi Shiyah-i Kuchulu published in 1969. It is a children's story on one level and on another, deeper level, it is an account of the painful story of the entire family, social life, and political structure of the Iranian people and future children. This story has been very popular in Iran as well as outside of the country both before and after the Islamic Revolution.

The Little Black Fish is the story of a fish's quest to reshape the destiny of the fishfolk. The story takes place amid the ultimate ennui of the race of fish and a little black fish's refusal to settle in the stream of every day life. He refuses to stay at the same place all his life and to do everything the way his parents and the community expect him to do.

> ...despite his mother's pleas, the hero, The Little Black Fish, (Mahi Seyahe Kocholo) leaves the little stream in search of the sea. In a masterly depletion of the dialectics of experience as knowledge,

> knowledge as action and action as movement, the little fish goes through both benign and malignant sides of life, always learning, always acting upon his knowledge, always moving closer to the object of his quest. The little black fish finally succeeds in murdering the heron, the arch-enemy of the race of fish. His own fate is left undetermined, but the continuity of the struggle is emphasized in no uncertain terms. The whole story is framed in a gathering of the fish at the bottom of the sea where the grandmother fish is narrating the heroic story of the little black fish to twelve thousand of her children and grandchildren. In what is a vivid, if slightly too forced ending, the narrator concludes: "Eleven thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine little fish said good night and went to sleep. The grandmother fell asleep too. But try as she might, a little red fish could not go to sleep. All night long she thought about the sea..."[23]

Thomas M. Ricks sees the Little Black Fish's story differently when he asserts,

> In The Little Black Fish, an allegorical tale of the ways to achieve knowledge and consciousness of the dynamics of society, Behrangi raises basic questions concerning change and continuity in life and builds a clear understanding of society through the experiences of others. The initial departure of the little black fish (from his mother's home) and the resulting uproar due to the fish's desire "to see the enc of the stream" is a very important lesson in education and politics. The more the fish was pressed by his mother and neighbors to stay, the clearer the issues became. When questioned as to how the fish learned about there being "another world" and "an end to the stream", anyway, the fish replied he learned about these matters on his own and from listening to others. After enduring the constant complaints of the old fishes, the little black fish wanted to know "is there another way to live in the world?"; a question the little fish could not answer until he had traveled and experienced other "worlds."[24]

As Behrangi wrote this masterpiece of Persian literature, he created a new culture of children's stories and inspired a new way of looking at children's literature in Iran. It seems that Behrangi consciously or unconsciously was influenced by John Dewey's educational philosophy of preparing children for life and the society's realities that constantly are changing and children have to face those realities. Here is an example of his "Pragmatic" or progressive and realistic thoughts on children's life, school, and literature:

> ...we teach our children to be true and not to lie even though we are living in a society and a time that even the right eye lies to the left eye

> (everyone lies to each other)... Why do we teach our children that lying is not right? Why do we tell them that stealing is wrong? Why do we tell them that obedience is admirable and is the right way to live? Why won't we explain the root causes and reasons of lying and stealing to our children? ...isn't it time that the child must know that his father suffers, labors, and works hard to earn a few dollars and a few loaves of bread, and how sick and depressed his elder brother who cannot move his hands and feet, and he may die any time? Why is the child not told about this family's situation? We must teach our children to oppose whatever is inhumane and nonhumanitarian for they are the barriers to historical accomplishment of society. This avenging attitude kind of thinking must come to children's literature and open a new way of looking at literature...[25]

Behrangi learned about John Dewey, an American pragmatist philosopher, in the Teacher's Education College of Tabriz. Although his general teaching and learning approach to teaching stories and children's literature seems to be very close to Dewey's "Progressive" educational philosophy. But in his writing Behrangi did not think that the Iranian villages were ready for this new approacn to learning, and perhaps it is a liberal method of learning.[26]

During the history of Iranian children's literature, perhaps this is the first time that the child is taught and told through stories to react and behave kindly toward good individuals and to respond to oppressors, abusers, and inhumane persons as they deserve. Behrangi strongly believed that if Iranian children are exposed to this new and democratic concept and philosophy of life, they will get to know their family well, will learn about their society's political system, educational establishment, economic problems and prosperity, and will learn about things as they exist around them in reality. Children are not necessarily to obey their parents' advice if the parents themselves are not practicing what they preach. In this children's long, interesting, visionary story of the Little Black Fish, Behrangi envisions and depicts society's problems and prospects as they relate to children growing up.

In particular, Mahi-ye Seyah-e Kucholo received a great deal of attention among educators, intellectuals and literature lovers at the national and international level. As a result of Mahi Seyahe Kocholo's provocative and revolutionary ideas, Behrangi gradually received more attention to the extent that during the late 1960s and early 1970s, some of his other Farsi and Turkish stories were read, taught, and discussed by the Farsi literature professors at the Teacher's Education University of Tehran and gradually in other higher education institutions. But Mahi-yi Siyah-i Kuchulu was not his last master piece, another more significant masterpiece as Saedi put it, "was his life, he was constantly learning and teaching."[27]

How Did Behrangi's Life End?

On the one hand Behrangi's death was both sad and tragic for friends, students, and educational reformers, but on the other hand his death ignited, fueled, and provoked democratic ideas and perhaps a stronger demand for fundamental social, political, and educational changes. His death was unexpected and too soon; he was only 38 years old and yet he left a tremendous amount of writing, ideas, solutions, and experience behind. The news of his death went around secretly that he fell in the Arras River (a river bordering the former Soviet Union and Iran's Azarbyjan province) when he was walking on the river bank. One may ask, how was it possible for Behrangi to drown when he knew how to swim and furthermore, why had he gone to the river side? Finding an answer to this question certainly would require an investigation in Behrangi's home country. One view that circulated through local papers, friends, and the government's opposition groups was that he was killed and dropped in the Arras River by the SAVAK police (the Shah's secret police).

Perhaps, this took place because of his harsh criticism of the regime, which resulted in demands from the public, educators, university faculty and students, and intellectuals for liberty, democracy, and liberalization of all government institutions. However, whether he died accidentally or was killed, Behrangi's death was a great loss to the village children. His courage and heroic character, however, remained and became a source of inspiration for many of Azarbaijan's college students, teachers, and intellectuals to object not only to harmful educational policies but also to the government's political oppression. His death was unacceptable to anyone who knew him, particularly the children, youth, and farmers of villages of Managhan, Akhgirjan, Azar-Shahr, Kkhosrow-Shah, and Dehkhreghan who wept profusely for him. Behrangi truly had earned the reputation of being one of the greatest Iranian teachers and thinkers. It seemed that the whole country wept for him.

Behrangi went everywhere to help village students and the poor. Here are the words of Gholamhosayn Saedi characterizing Behrangi's extent of dedication for village children:

> ...for years wearing his black coat, he walked the roads from village to village. Everyone new him, "Samad's here." "Samad's there." "Samad gone to Yam." "Samad's gone to Akhirjan." Where he was in the rural areas, he did not like a city person. He would start a class in a stable, school, village square or graveyard. And he took part in village life.[28]

Behrangi was born, reared, and educated in Iran, but he exposed himself to Western democratic and educational ideas through reading and translating English materials. He also fought for children's causes and died proudly for exercising his beliefs on what he considered a proper education for the rural population of Iran. Also, Behrangi was a strong critic of the unsuitable educational policies and educational wrongdoing of the Pahlavi's regime.

Behrangi had a great deal of influence on the structure and direction of Iranian education and his impact continues to be felt. Some effects of his life and death on village

education in Iran were seen during the last years of Pahlavi's regime as the villagers and ethnic students received different textbooks with more appropriate content than the urban students. Another change under Pahlavi's regime was that Behrangi's ideas inspired many students, educators, and intellectuals to question and criticize the ruling class of Iran and perhaps the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution might also be seen, in part, as a result of Behrangi's ideas and influence.

The question of whether Behrangi was a revolutionary politician, a progressive educator, or an artist instructor have been discussed over the years. Behrangi was an artist and scientist teacher wanting to improve his students life by utilizing and proposing a suitable scientific approach to children's life and learning. As one learns from The Little Black Fish, children should be allowed to experience ideas rather than using other's advice.

Throughout the modern educational history of Iran, since the establishment of Darolfounon, the first western-style university in 1858 through the formation of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Samad Behrangi was one of the most outspoken, revolutionary, and intelligent teachers of Iranians, particularly the Azarbaijanese. The villagers make up seventy-five of the aggregate population of Iran, and the Azarbaijanese account for one-third of the total population. For those of us who are not familiar with this inspiring intellectual figure who lived and worked during a dark period of Iranian educational history, Samad Behrangi was a dedicated revolutionary Iranian teacher who conceivably became the victim of a dictatorial regime. When he spoke and wrote, his speaking and writing represented the voice of village children and students in Iranian rural communities. Although his teachings were not well received or welcomed by school officials and government authorities when he was alive, Behrangi hoped his humanitarian educational ideas, thoughts, and works would be considered not only for the basis of Iranian rural schooling, but also for the country's educational system as a whole, which at the time was facing many difficulties.

In recognition of the impact of his death on those who knew Behrangi, Saedi maintains,

> ...no one can believe his death. And is Samad really dead? It's not possible. Samad is not dead, Samad is alive. Right now, he's on his way to Mameqan, talking with the children.[29]

As his friends, colleagues, and students see it, Behrangi lived and died honorably and never became a puppet to the Pahlavi's regime. He did not sell his efforts or knowledge to any agency or individual for a political or economic purpose, but dedicated and sacrificed his life for the well-being of the misunderstood, often ignored, and left behind Iranian villagers and poor. About Behrangi life and death Gholamhosayn Saedi professed,

> ...Samad Behrangi has neither a birth date nor date of death.., ...his death is as unbelievable as was his life which was always so full of excitement that it resembled fiction. He was a teacher. Although he was exiled to the villages, he loved them.[30]

A final and important lesson might be learned as one reviews Behrangi's writings and life: his educational theories and experiences could be considered as the basis of a new educational paradigm for struggling and emerging educational systems not only in Iran but also in other culturally similar developing nations in different parts of the globe. Particularly, Behrangi's noble and practical ideas should be given attention by those developing and underdeveloped countries which are at the beginning or the middle of the struggle to adopt and implement Western educational ideas in their countries which ancient cultural, religious, and traditional ideas have an important root and place.

Samad Behrangi was brave to write and state in a loud voice what lesser other educator and people were afraid of or incapable of writing or saying. Behrangi served as an inspiring torch and beacon to shine on the darkness of the illiterate life of the Iranian villagers just as Zardusht (Zoroaster), the first Persian teacher, did on the life of Persian Aryans during 900 to 600 B.C. Gholam-Hussein Saedi, a fine contemporary Iranian writer announced Samad Behrangi as Iran's "Hans Christian Anderson" and a " caring traveler teacher." Ghowgha Khalatbary, a writer, editor, and publisher of Iran's Express Newspaper called Behrangi "Samad, a sincere friend of hardworking, painstaking people."[31]

It seems what made it difficult for anyone to believe Behrangi's death was an accident, is the irony that this man, who could imagine, write, and create The Little Black Fish, who himself had endured and went through the cruel and harsh ups and downs of the stream, river, and ocean of life, is the same person who did not know how to swim as he fell in the Arras River. The incident took place in 1968, although his life was lived very fruitfully, it was short-lived. But this was not an unusual occurrence under the kind of government that was ruling Iran. These are some of Behrangi's last words:

> ...death will come to me anyway, but as long as I can live, I must not look to meet my death. Certainly, if I have to face my death, which I would do anyway, this is not important: What is important to me is what is going to be the effect of my death or life on the life of others...[32]

Notes

1. Cited from the Persian Journalist Ghogha Khalatbarry's article published in the Iran Express (a weekly Farsi newspaper published in Washington D. C.) Vol. II, No. 8, Saturday, February 24, 1979, p. 8.

2. Ibid., p. 7.

3. Ibid., p. 9.

4. Behrangi, Samad, "Kando-Kaw Dr Massayeal-e Trrbieti Iran" (Search in Educational Problems of Iran), "Antesharat Bamdad" (Bamdad Publisher company). Tehran, Iran (1343), 1965 p. 9.

5. Ibid., p. 63.

6. Ibid., p. 68.

7. Ibid., p. 9.

8. Ibid,, p. 67.

9. Ibid., pp. 72.

10. Ibid., p. 62.

11. Ibid., p. 69.

12. Ibid., pp. 88-84.

13. Ibid., p. 83.

14. Ibid., p. 84.

15. Ibid., p. 83

16. Ibid., p. 91.

17. "Majmoeh-e Maghaleha: Samad Behrangi" (Collections of Articles Written by Samad Behrangi, collected and Published in 1342, p. 254. This publication does not have the Author's name, but it is printer by Donya and Roozbehan Publishing Company in Tehran.

18. Ibid., p. 255.

19. Please see Kando Kav Dar Masayeal Tarbityeh Iran, p. 16-17.

20. Ibid., Majmoeh-e Maghaleha, p. 253.

21. Ibid., Kando Kav Dar Masayeal Tarbityeh Iran, p. 16.

22. Please see Kando Kav Dar Masayeal Tarbitya-e Iran, p. 36-40.

23. Ibid., p. 255.

24. Thomas M. Ricks, Critical Perspectives on Modern Persian Literature. Washington D.c.: Three Continents Press, 1984, p. 367.

25. Ibid., Majmoeh Mghaleha, p. 253.

26. For this point, please see Kando Kav, pp. 7-8.

27. Ibid., Modern Persian Literature, p. 360.

28. Cited form It's Night, Yes Night, by Gholamhosan Saedi. It is from the second printing of the special edition of the literary journal Aresh, Darhareh-yi Sanad-i Behrangi. (About Samad Behrangi). Vol 5, No. 18 (Azar 1347/Nov.-Dec. 1968). pp. 15, 16, 106. The author, Saedi was a close friend of Behrani, and he is a prominent social critic and writer. the Qute was taken for the book Modern Persian Literature.

29. Cited from the Iranian Journalist Ghogha Khalatbarry's article published in the Iran Express (a weekly Farsi newspaper published in Washington D. C.) Vol. II, No. 8, Saturday, February 24, 1979, pp. 7-8.

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